Tien Nguyen

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WRP Paper

Wireless Philadelphia Project and Its Fatal Weakness

Wireless Philadelphia Project was the biggest of its kind in term of the largest area of coverage wireless internet in the United States. The goal was to create a low cost to free Wi-Fi network that covered the entire city 135 square miles. With this network, the government hoped that it would close the gap in digital divide, improve knowledge of its citizens and simulate the area economy. However, the project encountered numerous problems in implement its network and the quality of the service provided. As the result, EarthLink, the company that first developed the network, backed out of this deal. Luckily, the network did not die because there were local investors that form a company called Network Acquisition Co. LLC took the control of the network in a deal agreed by EarthLink Inc. and the city of Philadelphia. Throughout the development of the project, we see that the actual work needed to finish the project and its future application may not worth the cost to maintain the network and the project will fail because of today fast improvement in wireless technology, and many other affects.

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# I. The Wireless Philadelphia Project background information.

## The idea to establish the city wireless.

Nowadays, internet likes a part of modern life; you read news on the net, weather, traffic, paying bills online, shopping, studying…etc. Every affects of life are including the use of internet. And yet, not all people in the same city have same access like others. The digital divide is wide enough to make a notice of the city government, yield the need of a solution to shorten the gap between its citizens. Base on this, wireless city came up like a potential solution for this problem. With the hope that affordable internet service will be available for all of its citizens, as the result, this will short the gap of digital divide.

## The benefits of a wireless city.

There are many benefits of a wireless city, like draw more of business to the city, its citizens able to connect to the internet anywhere, and be more productive. Along with its affordable price, it also plays a role in educating its young population in many different areas of life. It will shorts the digital divide, and in the future reaching the goal that all of its citizens know how to use the advantage of internet and have the opportunity to access the internet to educate themselves and be ready at the level of 21th century.

# II. The organizations and private company that involved in the project and their roles.

## EarthLink Inc and its role in the project

EarthLink Inc. one of the leading in building municipal Wi-Fi city, stepped in and took the project. However, the company with many failures in the Wi-Fi projects could not finish the implement of the network and finally backed out of the project, leaving the unfinished Wi-Fi city. It also fired ½ of it workforces and selling its wireless equipments, completely out of wireless business.

## Wireless Philadelphia Organization

Wireless Philadelphia, [www.wirelessphiladelphia.org](http://www.wirelessphiladelphia.org) , is a nonprofit organization that preformed to work with the project Wireless Philadelphia, its role is very significant in throughout the development and operation of the project. Its primary target is low income citizens without hardware needed and knowledge to benefit the project. They created package that help A-Z those targets and will help to monitoring the operation of the network, as same as distributing packages within the arrangement.

## Network Acquisition Co. LLC.

The local investors that form the company NAC took over the network form the EarthLink. With different models and ways of approaching to solution for digital divide, so far its model is far effective compared to EarthLink. They keep getting more subscribers, and on the way to cover completely the entire city in its network range.

# III. Reasons of the failure of municipal wireless projects and Wireless Philadelphia in particular.

## The cost to build and maintain the network

Despite all the good benefits of the wireless city, the cost that needed to build and maintaining the network is way too expensive, this is one of the reasons why EarthLink Inc backed out of the project. The money that it invested in the project far more than it expected , plus the poor signal indoor and also outdoor, the unstable of the wireless network , make it hard to find subscribers that willing to pay for the service while they can pay a bit more to get a stable and wire connection from local providers.

## The failure of the municipal models and Wireless Philadelphia project in particular

The model of municipal wireless, the agreement between government and a private company to generate a Wi-Fi network that benefit the city and also make the profit for the private company that invested, does not work as expected. And for that, many of this kind projects failure across the country. Just like Glenn Fleishman writes at Wi-Fi Net News, “Three years into this, however, it’s clear that that capital investment is 2 to 3 times higher than what was anticipated to reach a level of service quality that people will expect; that, when presented with potential competition, DSL and cable operators will slash prices and offer cheap 1-year or ‘lifetime’ rates with long-term contracts; and that wireless broadband delivered via Wi-Fi isn’t the best of ideas for indoor service.”

The complicated equipment used in the implement is another factor of the failure. The wireless really weak indoor and coverage not completed. The expensive equipments used to improve the service caused the company more money invested. As the result, the company wasted all it resources to build an unreliable, unstable and weak connection and yet hope to improve revenue, this is clearly unquestionable, completely failure. Just like the EarthLink CEO Rolla Huff said “It was a great idea a few years ago … but it’s an idea that simply didn’t make it.”

## Improvement in wireless technology and its effect to the project

There are also the facts the improvement in technology with reach to the level that, in the near future, the cost to build another wireless network and maintain the new network will much less than the current building one. The speed also will improve during time. The technology will overcome the capabilityof the current network. Its use in equipments will improve and same for the speed, the quality of service. Therefore, the proper technology is an important key to build network which will cost less to build and deliver way faster speed. The production of this will make the current project, which built in old technology, obsolete soon enough to realize the need of the improvement in technology.

Another reason is the competition of local operators, in this case Comcast and Verizon they been providing slightly same amount money for a cable or DSL services. The wireless network with its unstable connection and low reliable in this competition will soon end up lost of interest and customers. The wireless service indoor will never get the same as cable and DSL provider. Since the nature of the technology need a wide open space for better connection. As results, as long as the technology not out reaches the wall in the houses, the success of the wireless model will not be high. Sometimes, it’s better to wait for better technology before developing a new model.

# V. Conclusion

The project was built with good intentions but the model first running it was fail, and the new owner trying to bring back the life to the project; however, this life is a temporary because of its way to self destruction. The technology is still developing while we read about this and same for wireless equipments. Another factor that causes the failure of the project is the Cable and DSL providers , the local companies, will improve their technology, and aim to decrease their price, to the near low fee, plus the wire broadband is always stable than the wireless. When this happens, the wireless network will be used for different applications. The goal still reached by the value of internet provider will charge city citizens with slightly above the aiming value of municipal wireless would charge. This may be the good part of the project. The city should try to narrow the wireless coverage and improve the wire cable, or cooperate with local companies to develop programs that will provide low cost for citizens to get the internet service. It’s better to use your existence local sources than build a new, unstable and unpredictable wireless network.

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